

HERALD OF GOSPEL LIBERTY.

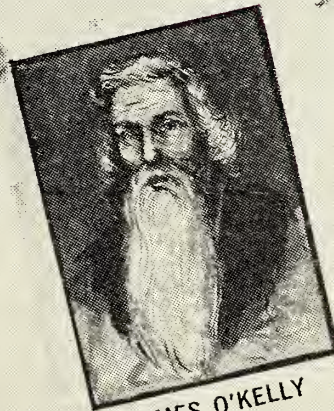
BY ELIAS SMITH.

THURSDAY EVENING, SEPTEMBER 1, 1808.

"FROM REALMS FAR DISTANT, AND FROM CLIMES UNKNOWN, KNOWLEDGE OF OUR KING YOUR OWN."

ADDRESS TO THE PUBLIC.

A brief history of the Christian Church



JAMES O'KELLY

by William T. Scott

The utility of such a paper has suggested to me, from the great use which are to be to the community at large. In almost the whole state of the world is to us at once. In a short and cheap general knowledge of our affairs is through the whole; and by looking at the News-paper, we often look at the stations, and see them rise into importance and fall into ruin. If we are profited by the knowledge of the Redeemer's kingdom, it will be promoted or increased in the world. It appears to me best to make the liberal subscriptions for this paper, in these trying times, has encouraged me to begin it, hoping that others will be advantage in forwarding the work, and their names to the list of those who have wished such a work to appear.

There are many things which will be of great use to the rising generation, if stated to the rising generation, to give them a knowledge of the things which their fathers bled, and fought to contend.

The design of the Editor, in doing this, is of civil and religious Liberty, the capacities of those whose minds have been small, as to acquiring a knowledge of the world.

It is to be that some may wish to have the paper should be named the "HERALD OF LIBERTY." This kind of paper which can make us have the Liberty of the sons of God proclaimed; and which is to stand fast in, be supported and enjoyed by the law of the spirit, which makes free from the law.

I give the meaning of this word is derived from the word "liberty," and by abbreviation, that language signifies a free army, and growing in power, was given to him with a special charge to denounce the law and combat, to the martial message, and in the English language, To marshal, or to lead in cavalcades, ceremonies, royal marriages, installations of Dukes, Marquisses, Earls, &c.

"KNOWN AS CHRISTIANS, SIMPLY"

In the decade that closed the eighteenth century and opened the nineteenth, three widely separated groups of American Christians found themselves impelled away from their denominational ties. Independently, each group determined to shun any descriptive title for itself save the one term that each found truly descriptive: *Christian*.

So arose the three components of what then quickly became this continent's first indigenous religious denomination, a consummation accomplished without so much as a vote, but rather by common consent based on mutual acknowledgment that the hand of God had led them, geographically isolated from one another, out of different backgrounds, to strikingly similar actions.

THE SOUTH — "REPUBLICAN METHODISTS"

Chronologically, the first of the three was a band of Methodists led by the deeply pious James O'Kelly, a native Virginian who, strongly influenced by John Wesley's lay preachers, became one himself. O'Kelly was Presiding Elder of the vast Southern District. His deep conviction, power and influence were attested to by no less a contemporary than Bishop Francis Asbury, whose autocratic rule was sparking rebellion at the increasing episcopal influence in the Methodist organization.

O'Kelly was opposed to bishops. At "General Conference" in Baltimore in 1792 he sought to offset the growing power of the Methodist bishops by increasing democracy in church government. When his "Right of Appeal" resolution failed, he led 31 Methodist preachers from the Conference; although he was still continuing to seek amendments to the Methodist discipline. Finally in 1793, the dissenters associated themselves as "Republican Methodists," and in August 1794 they assembled in a General Meeting in Virginia's Surry County.

Rice Haggard, an associate of O'Kelly in withdrawing from the Baltimore conference, enunciated the simple doctrine that brought into being the Christian Church. A New Testament open in his hand, Haggard rose: "Brethren, *this* is a sufficient rule of faith and practice, and by it we are told the disciples were called Christians, and I move that henceforth and forever the followers of Christ be known as Christians, simply."

The motion carried and the Christian Church was born, democratic in its simple polity, its laymen equal to its ministers in representation to the Conference. Primarily Wesleyan in doctrine, with the right and privilege reserved to the in-

dividual to interpret truth as he might be led by the Holy Spirit, the Christian Church was committed firmly to the union of Christ's followers. The Church covered most of the South, organized in local Conferences, and became in 1847 the Southern Christian Association, then, in 1856, the Southern Christian Convention, which identity prevails to this day within the Congregational Christian Churches. (The Southern Convention was always more connectional and presbyterial than the rest of the Christian denomination. This condition still prevails; yet the Convention is a constituent member of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches.)

NEW ENGLAND — CHRISTIAN CHARACTER THE ONLY TEST

A Baptist layman in Vermont, Dr. Abner Jones, was sorely disturbed by sectarian names and human creeds, and in 1801, joined by others concerned over the Calvinism of the Baptist and Congregational Churches, he formed New England's first "free Christian Church." Its members called themselves simply Christians, refusing even the limitation of the definite article, "the."

In the following year, Dr. Jones was ordained by the Freewill Baptists, after specifying that he would not be a Baptist, but only a Christian. He soon encountered Elias Smith, a Baptist minister who also had recently withdrawn from the denomination in protest at Calvinism, together with baptism and close communion, as a requisite for church membership.

The two men spread the organization of the Christian Church through New England, and by 1809 "General" or "Union" meetings of ministers and lay brethren were begun. These developed into local conferences and were organized into the New England Christian Convention in 1845. In keeping with the initial resistance to "human creeds," Christian character, or vital Christian piety, was the Church's only test of fellowship, communion or membership.

Elias Smith, a brilliant writer, conceived the idea of a Christian newspaper to augment the spread of the Word, and in 1808 he founded the first religious newspaper in America, the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*. This became the official organ of the Christian Church, and from September 1, 1808, it was published continuously (under different names from time to time) until its merger with the Congregationalist *Advance* after the union of the Congregational and Christian Churches in 1931.

KENTUCKY — CALVINISM AND THE "LAST WILL"

Meanwhile a group of Presbyterians in Kentucky, led by ministers Barton W. Stone and David Purviance, withdrew from the Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky

in 1803, in protest at rigid Calvinism. The dissidents organized an independent Springfield Presbytery. The following year the body was dissolved, publishing a historic "Last Will and Testament" pleading for more lay rule, firmer reliance on the Bible as the guide and union with the body of Christ at large.

As had the Southern and New England groups, the followers of Stone and Purviance took the name Christian to the exclusion of all others. Fellowship among the three groups was presaged when Rice Haggard, O'Kelly's associate in the Southern group, visited and worked among the Kentucky Christians. Union had reached northward lately when Haggard's address, "To the Different Societies on the Sacred Import of the Name Christian," was published by the New England Christians' newspaper, *Herald of Gospel Liberty*.

The Stone and Purviance group organized the Kentucky Christian Conference in 1804. Fed by the vitality of the Kentucky revival of the early nineteenth century, the movement spread westward and Conferences soon grew up in Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. By 1808 contact and fellowship had begun with both the Southern and New England Conferences.

The three groups were convinced that more than mere coincidence had caused them to set upon similar courses from different beginnings, and all at virtually the same time. They saw the hand of God in their passion for Christian union, in their common desire to overcome sectarian strife and narrow denominationalism. Each had chosen the name Christian not presumptively but devoutly, eschewing any limiting or restrictive thoughts from their title.

As a consequence, the three groups agreed by common and unanimous consent to join together in furtherance of what all conceived to be their mission, "the union of the followers of Jesus Christ, that the world may believe." In this unique union the three groups existed in harmony, sharing what was common to all, yet each maintaining its own essential ideas, forms of work and interpretations of the ordinances.

Immersionists and affusionists existed in fellowship. Widely differing interpretations of theology existed in freedom. Bickering, heresy trials, quarrels and accusations—all yielded to the six principles which were the unanimous basis for the union:

1. The Lord Jesus Christ, the only head of the Church.
2. The name Christian, to the exclusion of all party and sectarian names, sufficient for the followers of Christ.
3. The Holy Scriptures, or the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, the only creed, a sufficient rule of faith and practice.
4. Christian character, or vital Christian piety, the only and sufficient test of Christian fellowship and Church membership.

5. The right of private judgment and the liberty of conscience, a right and a privilege that should be accorded to and exercised by all.
6. The union of the followers of Christ, to the end that the world may believe.

The early Conferences of the Christian Church were fearful of being only one more in the host of denominations. They were wary, too, of ecclesiastical domination; so wary, indeed, that at the close of each Conference session its records were burned lest some day they might be used to limit the freedom of any Church or future Conference. The shared passion for Christian union did quite the opposite of encouraging denominational development, and as a result organization on any but local bases was slow. In 1820 there was a national meeting in Connecticut (The United General Conference of Christians). The "American Christian Convention" later became the inclusive name of the Churches. Years went by before this name was changed to the more cohesive "General Convention of the Christian Church."

CONFUSION OF NAMES

Meanwhile, some of the Churches of the Kentucky Conference entered into a succession of developments which gave rise to some confusion at the time, since sorely compounded among church historians. In 1832, some of the followers of Barton W. Stone in Kentucky arrived at an agreement for local union with some of the followers of Alexander Campbell, leader of a body of once-Presbyterian and Baptist "Reformers" in Pennsylvania. Contrary to some historical sources, Campbell, himself a rigid immersionist, seems to have had little to do with effecting the union, which was purely local in scope. Campbell, in fact, wrote critically of Stone and other Christians.

In any event, a number of Christian Churches in Kentucky and the West had joined followers of Campbell in the Reformer movement, which soon became known as the "Disciples of Christ." The confusion that has plagued historians ever since arose when many of the Reformers, and the Christians joining them, continued to style themselves "Christians" and to call their new communion interchangeably the "Christian Church" and "Disciples of Christ," a condition which exists to this day.

As the Christian Church which stemmed from the Southern, New England, and Kentucky movements grew, it developed as a denomination, however reluctantly. But even as a denominational organization was growing up, the Church's leaders were committing their program to the advancement of the cause of Christian union. Throughout the Church's history as a separate denomination, it never held a general convention without advancing a plea or proposal for wider union.

With the historic emphasis of the Christian Churches on democracy and congregational autonomy, it was natural that discussions looking toward union should be conducted with the Congregationalists. In 1924, the General Convention renewed these talks and issued a plea for union among all American denominations. Out of this convention finally grew the union which in 1931 united the Congregational and Christian Churches.

From its earliest days, the Christian Church's view of union has been summarized: "The purpose of this Church will be consummated in the reformation of the world, and the union of all Christians."

PIONEERS FOR CHRIST AND UNION

In addition to its early fervor for union, the Christian Church pioneered in many areas where other denominations have followed. The *Herald of Gospel Liberty* blazed its trail in church newspapers. In 1817 women preachers worked among the Christians. Early in 1867 the Christian Church ordained its first (and possibly the nation's first) woman minister, Melissa Terrill.

College coeducation was another field pioneered by the Christians. Antioch College, headed by Horace Mann, was established at Yellow Springs, Ohio, in 1853, and to its first classes, as candidates for graduation, men and women were admitted without distinction. Other Christian colleges, including Elon in North Carolina, Defiance in Ohio and Southern Union in Alabama, were chartered as coeducational institutions. The Christians were among the first to unify their total educational programs by merging the Educational, the Sunday School and the Christian Endeavor Boards into one Board of Christian Education.

Home mission activity was launched by the Southern Christians at their organizational meeting in 1794, and Christian mission activity kept pace with the extension of the American frontier, and also supported work among the Negroes of the South after the Civil War. Foreign mission activity began in 1848 when the North Carolina Christian Conference ordained a Negro for mission work in Liberia during the settlement of that land.

Prior to the Civil War, anti-slavery sentiment had been strong in the Christian Church, both North and South. After the war Negro conferences sprang up, eventually forming the Afro-Christian Convention, representing about 15,000 souls. It was a constituent member of the General Convention. Despite the establishment of Negro churches, many liberated slaves lived out their lives retaining membership and participation in the same churches they had attended before the war, continuing to worship God with their former masters.

The central spirit which motivated the Christian Church from its origin until the union in 1931 was aptly put when plans for merger with the Congregationalists were being formulated. It is as appropriate today. In 1929 the late William Allen Harper, president of Elon College, wrote:

"After this merger is consummated, as the Christian Church devoutly prays that it may be, the Christian Denomination will lose itself in a united movement with the Congregationalists, but both of these denominations will find themselves more alive than ever in a continuous and united service for the cause of Christian union in the nation and the world. Nor can the passion of these united churches for Christian union be discredited on the ground that a united Christendom would abridge the liberty of Christians, because union is being approached by them in terms of Christianity as a way of life and on the further basis of a free church in a civil state, our Characteristic American doctrine. *There will be unity in the midst of diversity, and all the followers of Jesus will be members one of another in mutual tolerations, service and love crowned with the freedom with which Christ makes us free.*"

This historical sketch of the Christian Church was prepared in 1956 at the request of the Information Committee of the Executive Committee of the General Council. Dr. Scott is Superintendent of the Southern Convention of Congregational Christian Churches. Elon College, N. C. (Reprinted 1959)